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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0239
INFO USIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8224
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY BEIJING
AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
USMISSION GENEVA
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI
DIA WASHDC
HQSDA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 02310

DEPT FOR EAP/TB, HA, INR/B AND INM/AMB BORG
CINCPAC ALSO FOR FPA WILKINSON
USIA FOR EA AND BVF

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: NEW BURMESE LEADERSHIP PROMISES
POLITICAL PROGRESS

REFS: (A) RANGOON 2308,
- (B) FBIS BANGKOK 241348Z APR 92

[1](#)1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

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[1](#)2. SUMMARY: ON APRIL 24, BURMA'S RULING MILITARY COUNCIL ISSUED ITS MOST DRAMATIC POLITICAL STATEMENT IN MORE THAN A YEAR. IT PLEDGED TO RELEASE AN UNSPECIFIED NUMBER OF POLITICAL DETAINEES "PROMPTLY", TO OPEN A DIALOGUE WITH OPPOSITION POLITICIANS WITHIN TWO MONTHS, AND TO CONVENE A "NATIONAL CONVENTION" SIX MONTHS LATER. THE ANNOUNCEMENT BREAKS SIGNIFICANT NEW GROUND BY ACKNOWLEDGING THE EXISTENCE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AND BY SETTING TIME FRAMES FOR INITIAL MOVES TOWARD CONSTITUTIONAL RULE. COMING ONE DAY AFTER GENERAL THAN SHWE REPLACED SAW MAUNG AS HEAD OF STATE, IT REINFORCES EARLIER SPECULATION THAT THE FORMER LEADER MAY HAVE BEEN THE PRINCIPAL ROADBLOCK TO ADOPTION OF A MORE PRAGMATIC APPROACH ON POLITICAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES.

[1](#)3. NEVERTHELESS, THE MILITARY RETAINS TIGHT CONTROL AND IS STILL FOLLOWING THE BASIC SCENARIO OUTLINED IN ITS DECLARATION 1/90, A COMPLEX MULTI-STAGED PROCESS UNLIKELY TO PRODUCE A CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT BEFORE 1994 AT THE EARLIEST. AS THE PLEDGE TO RELEASE POLITICAL DETAINEES CONTAINS A GAPING LOOPHOLE -- THE EXCLUSION OF THOSE WHO "ENDANGER STATE SECURITY" -- IT IS ALSO UNCLEAR WHETHER AUNG SAN SUU KYI OR ANY OTHER MAJOR OPPOSITION FIGURES WILL BE FREED. STILL, IT IS A LONG-AWAITED STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION AND HAS BEEN GENERALLY WELL RECEIVED BY BURMESE OF ALL STRIPES. WE THUS RECOMMEND THAT THE DEPARTMENT CONSIDER ISSUING A CAREFULLY NUANCED STATEMENT CHARACTERIZING THE BURMESE ANNOUNCEMENT AS A POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND STRESSING THAT WE WILL BE WATCHING ITS IMPLEMENTATION AND BROADENING WITH KEEN INTEREST. (SEE PARA 11.) END SUMMARY.

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UNEXPECTED ANNOUNCEMENT REVIVES BURMESE POLITICAL HOPES

[1](#)4. ON APRIL 24, ONE DAY AFTER GENERAL THAN SHWE REPLACED SAW MAUNG AS CHIEF OF STATE (REF A), BURMA'S RULING STATE LAW AND ORDER RESTORATION COUNCIL (SLORC) MADE A SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT. IT PLEDGED:

-- TO RELEASE AN UNSPECIFIED NUMBER OF POLITICAL
DETAINEES "PROMPTLY";

-- TO OPEN A DIALOGUE WITH ELECTED PARLIAMENTARIANS
AND THE REMAINING POLITICAL PARTIES WITHIN TWO MONTHS;
AND

-- TO CONVENE A "NATIONAL CONVENTION" SIX MONTHS
LATER.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT, SIGNED BY INTELLIGENCE CHIEF AND
SLORC SECRETARY-1 KHIN NYUNT, HAD THE INSTANT EFFECT
OF REVIVING POLITICAL HOPES AMONG THE BURMESE POPULACE
AND RAISING EXPECTATIONS THAT MOVEMENT TOWARD A
CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT IS FINALLY IN THE REALM OF THE
POSSIBLE.

15. OUR OWN INITIAL ASSESSMENT AND THAT OF SEVERAL
SOLID BURMESE SOURCES IS THAT THIS REPRESENTS A
SIGNIFICANT BREAK WITH THE PAST. THE MOST STRIKING
ASPECT OF THE OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT IS ITS
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT BURMA HAS DETAINED PEOPLE FOR
POLITICAL REASONS, A 180-DEGREE REVERSAL FROM PREVIOUS
ASSERTIONS THAT ALL DETAINEES HAD "VIOLATED EXISTING
LAW." HOWEVER, HOW THE GOB WILL IMPLEMENT ITS
COMMITMENT TO RELEASE THESE PEOPLE REMAINS AN OPEN
QUESTION: THE ANNOUNCEMENT CONTAINS A LOOPHOLE IN
EXCLUDING THOSE WHO "ENDANGER STATE SECURITY" AND DOES
NOT MAKE IT CLEAR WHETHER THE RELEASES WILL INCLUDE
PERSONS ALREADY CONVICTED OF "CRIMINAL" OFFENSES -- AS
OPPOSED TO THOSE MERELY "ARRESTED AND DETAINED" FOR
POLITICAL REASONS.

16. IN AN OPTIMISTIC VEIN, ONE FORMER POLITICIAN
SPECULATED TO US THAT THE "SECURITY" EXCLUSION IS
LARGELY A FACE-SAVING PHRASE AND THAT UP TO 90 PERCENT
OF POLITICAL PRISONERS COULD BE ON THE STREETS
SHORTLY. HOWEVER, A MUCH MORE CAUTIOUS ASSESSMENT WAS
PROVIDED BY TWO SEASONED BURMESE JOURNALISTS (PROTECT)
WHO DO NOT EXPECT THE IMMINENT RELEASE OF AUNG SAN SUU
KYYI OR ANY OTHER ACTIVE OPPOSITION FIGURES LIKE NLD
LEADERS KYI MAUNG AND FORMER GENERAL TIN 00. MOST
SOURCES AGREE THAT THE AUTHORITIES WILL PROBABLY LIFT
THE HOUSE ARREST OF U NU, SINCE THE ELDERLY AND
ENFEEBLED FORMER PRIME MINISTER HAS NOT BEEN CONVICTED
OF ANY CRIME AND HARDLY REPRESENTS A SECURITY THREAT
AT THIS POINT.

POLITICAL "DIALOGUE" FINALLY IN SIGHT

17. THE COMMITMENTS TO MEET WITH POLITICAL LEADERS AND
TO CONVENE A NATIONAL CONVENTION ARE NOT NEW, AND MUST
BE SEEN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SLORC'S "DECLARATION
1/90" -- A CONVOLUTED ROADMAP FOR EFFECTIVELY NEGATING
THE RESULTS OF THE 1990 ELECTIONS. ACCORDING TO THAT
DECLARATION, THE SOLE FUNCTION OF THE NATIONAL
CONVENTION WILL BE TO DRAFT A CONSTITUTION WHICH WILL
STILL BE SUBJECT TO APPROVAL BY SLORC AND POSSIBLY A
NATIONAL REFERENDUM. ONLY AFTER ADOPTION OF THE
CONSTITUTION WOULD NEW ELECTIONS BE HELD AND POWER
TRANSFERRED TO A (LIKELY COSMETIC) CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT.

18. NEVERTHELESS, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THE GOB HAS
PROVIDED ANY TIME FRAME FOR EVEN THESE INITIAL STEPS
TOWARD DRAFTING A CONSTITUTION. IN FACT, FORMER
CHIEF OF STATE SAW MAUNG EXPLICITLY TOLD OUR CHARGE IN
JANUARY THAT THERE IS "NO TIME FRAME" FOR MOVES TOWARD
CONSTITUTIONAL RULE. INTELLIGENCE CHIEF KHIN NYUNT
AND OTHERS HAD ALSO INDICATED EARLIER THAT THE
POLITICAL PARTIES THEMSELVES WOULD BE EXPECTED TO TAKE
THE INITIATIVE FOR CONVENING A NATIONAL CONVENTION --
AN INVITATION TO "SUICIDE" GIVEN THE GOB PENCHANT FOR
PICKING OFF THOSE WHO SHOW POLITICAL INITIATIVE. NOW,
THE GOVERNMENT HAS PLEDGED TO START TALKS WITHIN TWO
MONTHS WITH THE LEADERS OF THE "POLITICAL PARTIES
EXISTING LAWFULLY" AND "INDIVIDUAL" MP'S. HOW THEY

WILL IMPLEMENT THIS AND WHETHER POLITICIANS WILL BE
FREE TO TAKE INDEPENDENT POSITIONS REMAINS TO BE
SEEN.

BUT PARTICIPATION MAY BE LIMITED

¶9. BASED ON THE NEW LEADERSHIP'S STATEMENT, THE GOB NOW
APPEARS WILLING TO SIT DOWN WITH SOME BUT NOT ALL OF
THOSE ELECTED TO PARLIAMENT IN THE MAY 1990
ELECTIONS: ACCORDING TO THE LATEST OFFICIAL
ANNOUNCEMENTS, 98 OF THE 485 ELECTED MP'S HAVE EITHER
BEEN DISQUALIFIED (68), RESIGNED (12), OR DIED (8)
OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS. AN ADDITIONAL 20 OR SO ARE
BELIEVED TO BE IN DETENTION, EITHER CONVICTED OR
AWAITING TRIAL BUT NOT YET FORMALLY DEREGISTERED BY
THE ELECTIONS COMMISSION. OF THE ORIGINAL 235 PARTIES
FORMED IN 1989 AND THE 93 THAT CONTESTED THE 1990
ELECTIONS, ONLY TEN REMAIN LEGAL. AMONG THESE ARE THE
NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY (NLD), THE SHAN NLD, AND
THE PROGOVERNMENT NATIONAL UNITY PARTY, WHICH TOGETHER
ACCOUNTED FOR 423 OF THE ORIGINAL PARLIAMENTARIANS.
THE GOVERNMENT'S REFERENCE TO "INDIVIDUAL" MPS
APPARENTLY INCLUDES TWO GROUPS: THOSE ELECTED FROM
PARTIES WHICH HAVE SINCE BEEN ABOLISHED, AND A HANDFUL
OF NLD MPS WHO HAVE EITHER RESIGNED OR BEEN EXPELLED
FROM THE PARTY.

COMMENT AND RECOMMENDATION

¶10. THOUGH THERE ARE MANY UNCERTAINTIES AND CAVEATS
IN THE SLORC'S SHORT STATEMENT, IT SEEMINGLY
REPRESENTS THE FIRST PROMISE OF A BREAK-UP OF BURMA'S
POLITICAL LOGJAM. WE CAN ONLY SPECULATE ON THE
FACTORS LEADING UP TO THIS ANNOUNCEMENT BUT IT NOW
APPEARS SAW MAUNG -- DESPITE HIS LACK OF DAY-TO-DAY
MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS
-- MAY HAVE BEEN THE KEY IMPEDIMENT TO ANY POLITICAL
OPENING. WHATEVER THE CASE, HIS DEPARTURE HAS
PROVIDED A CONVENIENT EXCUSE FOR THAN SHWE, PRESUMABLY
ACTING ON THE ADVICE OF KHIN NYUNT (AND POSSIBLY NE
WIN) TO MOVE FORWARD -- AT LEAST ON PAPER. WHILE
DOMESTIC CONSIDERATIONS WERE PROBABLY KEY, WE ALSO
ASSUME THAT MOUNTING INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE --
INCLUDING A MORE ACTIVE ROLE BY THE UNITED NATIONS AND
SOME QUIET ENCOURAGEMENT FROM CHINA -- MAY HAVE PUSHED
THE MILITARY IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

¶11. WHILE ANY U.S. REACTION SHOULD UNDERSCORE THE
NEED FOR DEEDS RATHER THAN MERE WORDS, EMBASSY
BELIEVES IT MIGHT BE APPROPRIATE FOR DEPARTMENT TO
NOTE THE LATEST GOB COMMITMENTS AS A FIRST STEP TOWARD
GREATER RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL
RULE. ALONG THESE LINES, A NUANCED STATEMENT SHOULD
STRESS THAT WE WILL BE OBSERVING THE IMPLEMENTATION
(AND BROADENING) OF THIS PROGRAM WITH GREAT INTEREST.

HUDDLE